Russia Constructed: the Practice of Avant-gardism in Taisho-era Japan, 1912-1926

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Introduction

> Traditionally, in the history of culture in Japan, which was modeled after more refined foreign examples, the cultural structure always had been under construction.[1]

Research conducted on Asian cultural adaptation of Western art idioms often aims to analyze the accuracy of cultural translation via individuals, events or publications. Although such examinations can be useful, they over-privilege the impact of verifiable contacts and under-privilege undocumented events. Instead of attempting to empirically measure the degree of change catalyzed by these events, this paper investigates moments of convergence between Russian and Japanese art circles in order to illustrate the appeal of the Russian avant-garde to Japan artists during a transitional period in Japanese art history. By exploring the negotiations manifested in these moments of meeting, both concrete and imagined, this paper suggests that Russian modernist art theories offered a template for the Japanese avant-garde to reject, modify and assimilate into its oeuvre during the Taisho period (1912-1926).

Recent scholarship on modern East Asian art history solidly establishes a history of confluences between China and Japan that points to a pattern in which Japan served as a mediator of Western modernism for China and other Asian countries in the modern era. This paper aims to better understand how Japan art successfully navigated its own path within the complex map of European modernist art. While Japan's exploration of primarily Western European idioms have been thoroughly discussed by scholars of Japanese art, scholarship that

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[1] All Japanese names that appear in this paper are listed with surnames preceding given names. Omuka Toshiharu, "Tada=Dada (Devotedly Dada) for the Stage: The Japanese Dada Movement 1920-1935," in *The Eastern Dada Orbit: Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Central Europe, and Japan*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1998), 225.

points to Japan's exploration of Eastern European avant-garde idioms has only recently come to the fore. Penelope Mason's seminal textbook *History of Japanese Art* (1993 edition), although an indispensable resource, neglects modern Japanese art that falls outside of realism, impressionism or expressionism.[2] Only in the last decade have scholars like Omuka Toshiharu and Gennifer Weisenfeld explored the avant-garde façade of early Japanese modern art, which left evidence that points to a clear engagement with Russia that was more sustained than with Western Europe.

To better understand the process by which Japanese culture came to its own in the early-twentieth century from a history of borrowing from China and from the West, I suggest the employment of "Occidentalism." A clear reversal of Edward Said's Orientalism, Occidentalism represents a broadly defined body of literature that advances the notion that non-Western cultures can essentialize Western cultures for their own needs, often political. Scholars such as Alastair Bonnet and Xiaomei Chen argue that the West is as much of a fluid construction of the non-West as the "Orient" is a construction of the West. Chen, in particular, argues that states forge these constructions as "potent anti-official discourse" to deploy against the local establishment.[3] This paper borrows this model to argue that the Japanese avant-garde groups in this examination constructed versions of Western avant-gardism in order to resist the art establishment.

The Context for Avant-garde

Avant-garde impulses, by logic, cannot arise without the constraining forces of an

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[2] Penelope Mason, *History of Japanese Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993).
[3] Xiaomei Chen, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-Discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28.

established institution. In late nineteenth century, three categories of painting constituted the Japanese canon: Chinese-style literati painting (*bunjinga*), Western-style oil painting (*yoga*), and Japanese-style painting (*nihonga*), defined through its synthesis of Western techniques and indigenous forms. By the turn of the twentieth century, *yoga* gained currency as the leading format for experimentation. Japanese art schools included *yoga* in their curriculums. Additionally, the Bunten—the Japanese equivalent to the state-sponsored French Salon—also included *yoga* since its inauguration in 1907. In 1914, the increased conservatism of Bunten judging standards prompted a group of young artists to stage their own Salon des Refuses, called the Nika.[4] By the end of the decade, more rebellious factions of Japanese artists found the Nika inadequate in accommodating a full range of artistic expression, and sought to forge new paths.

According to John Clark, the Japanese avant-garde emerged from this context to its height of success owing to three attributes: its rejection of the institutional art establishment that favored European academic styles; its position as the intellectual class through its members' certification at prestigious tertiary schools; and its role as mediators of new and mainly European knowledge to which they had a restricted access.[5] This paper builds on this analytical framework to argue that Russian avant-garde movements, as both the antidote to the Japanese art establishment and the progenitor of a new art idiom, suited the needs of the Japanese avant-garde for a subversive authority to paradoxically accept and challenge.

Russia Art and Literature: Early Encounters

During the late nineteenth century, upon realizing the opportunity presented by shifting

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[4] Mason, 368.
[5] John Clark, "The Avant-Garde," in *Modern Boy, Modern Girl: Modernity in Japanese Art, 1910-1935*, ed. Jackie Menzies (Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 1998), 81.

global dynamics, Japan began to plot its ascension to the ranks of world's most powerful nations. The Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 increased Japan's confidence in its imperialistic goals. The nation's political tension with Russia, however, minimally impacted Japanese intellectuals' interest in Russian avant-gardism. Since the 1880s, Japanese audiences had eagerly consumed translations of novels by Tolstoy, Chekhov and Dostoyevsky.[6] In the realm of literature, Russian works arguably exerted more influence than French, German and English works on literary development in Japan.[7] The political and psychological elements of Russian literature undoubtedly appealed to progressive Japanese artists and writers who were seeking new forms of expression in order to challenge their own establishment.

In the visual arts, Russia occupied a similar sphere of exoticism and intrigue for modern Japanese audiences. Whereas a number of Japanese artists received instruction in realism and early abstraction in Western Europe or from foreign teachers at home, the trend toward non-objectivism and Constructivism was shaped by intellectual fascination with Russia. Translations of Aleksei Gan's *Konstruktivizm* (1927) and Moisei Ginzburg's *Stil' i epokha* (1930) were available in to Japanese readers decades before they were translated in the West.[8]

Printmaker Yamamoto Kanae offered Japan one of its earliest glimpses of Russian avant-garde art. In his review of a 1916 Moscow exhibition, which he saw en route to Japan from Europe, Yamamoto published his drawings of Malevich's *Suprematist Composition* and a three-dimensional construction similar to Tatlin's *Monument for the Third International*. Yamamoto's brief exposure to the Russian avant-garde failed to impress him. Even though he credits Russian

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[6] Mochizuki Tetsuo, "Japanese Perceptions of Russian Literature in the Meiji and Taisho Eras," in *A Hidden Fire*, 18.
[7] Ibid., 17.
[8] Omuka Toshiharu, "David Burliuk and the Japanese Avant-garde," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 20, no. 1-2 (1986): 115.

modernists for their originality and self-expression voiced through personal theories, Yamamoto did not regard them as revolutionary or innovative.[9]

A Formula for Futurism

The Japanese avant-garde that emerged in the Taisho period can be exemplified by two major movements: the Futurist Art Association (1920-22) and Mavo (1923-25). Although the course of the two groups paralleled Futurist and Constructivist movements in Russia, we must understood it for its distinctive characteristics rather than its interpretation of foreign concepts. In practice, Japanese avant-garde movements placed less emphasis on theoretical frameworks than their Western counterparts. Many artists participated in both groups and their style shifted over time rather than abruptly. Consequently, the works produced by the members of the two groups often cannot be visually distinguished even though the two groups touted distinctive artistic foundations.

Led by passionate founders Kinoshita Shuichiro (1896-1991) and Murayama Tomoyoshi (1901-1977), and conveniently aided by Russian artists David Burliuk (1882-1967) and Varvara Bubnova (1886-1983), these movements created active sites for the negotiation of international avant-garde practices. Although the Burliuk and Bubnova merely accentuated the development of Japanese avant-garde movements that were already in motion, their presence added momentum and fueled theoretical discourses initiated by their Japanese advocates.

David Burliuk, "Mascot" of Avant-garde Expression

Known as the "Father of Russian and Ukrainian Futurism" who authored the 1912

[9] Ibid., 113.

manifesto, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," David Burliuk arrived in Japan in 1920 already a celebrity among artists of the budding Futurist Art Association (FAA). Burliuk brought with him 300 paintings and within two weeks of his arrival, organized an exhibition of Russian art that included works by him, his traveling companion, the Ukrainian artist Viktor Palmov, and those by Tatlin and Malevich.[10] Burliuk's whimsical but subversive ink sketches decorated exhibition flyers while the written descriptions emphasized Burliuk's certification at Western European art academies (Fig. 1).

Burliuk built on his reputation by cultivating a public persona that amused the Japanese art world. He enhanced his extroverted personality with a loud wardrobe that consisted of a top hat, a colorful waistcoat, flower on the lapel, a single earring, and sometimes face paint—all adorning a large Ukraine frame with a glass eye. According to Kinoshita Shuichiro, the founder of the FAA, Burliuk once began a public lecture by dashing Indian ink over a sheet of paper on the wall of the stage.[11] Such an occasion must have given Japanese artists the impression that Russian Futurism precisely emphasized the kind of personal freedom of expression that they espoused.

The fact that the FAA formed during the decline of Futurism in the West allowed Japanese Futurists more room for interpretation. They described Futurism as "art of the future," meaning art that allowed for unbridled self-expression.[12] Works in the three FAA exhibitions varied in style and subject matter, but many emphasized expressionistic brushwork over content. Yanase Masamu's stylized brushwork captured the spirituality and mood of the landscape in addition to visual dynamism (Fig. 2).

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[10] Ibid., 116.
[11] Ibid., 119.
[12] Gennifer Weisenfeld, *Mavo: Japanese Artists and the Avant-garde, 1905-1931* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2002), 46.

Arriving within weeks of the FAA's inaugural exhibition, Burliuk lent his charisma to the movement and through his nationality, gave a stamp of legitimization to the Japanese Futurists. Although at times inconvenienced by police surveillance, Burliuk equally benefitted from his high-profile status by taking advantage of frequent exhibition opportunities offered to him. Burliuk sold two works in the second FAA exhibition in 1921, including of *The Art of Dostoevskii* (Fig. 3).[13] This work undoubtedly appealed to Japanese art viewers for its distinctively Russian subject matter and Cubo-Futurist style.

Later that year, a Kyoto department store exhibition achieved a sale to a member of the Japanese Royal Family and a commission for a family portrait by Kiyoshi Morimoto, a Kobe city official and an important patron of the arts.[14] The resulting group portrait is often regarded as one of Burliuk's most successful realist paintings (Fig. 4). Even though Burliuk imbued the sitters with portrait-quality precision and naturalism, he set them against a Futurist border, thereby transforming a traditional format into an avant-garde work. Even though Burliuk left Japan in 1922 before the third and final FAA exhibition, his stylistic legacy resided in the works of his Japanese colleagues. Oura Shuzo's *Cup with Foam and the Smell of Meat* shows a similar angular distortion as many of Burliuk's paintings (Fig. 5). Even though sales and commissions allowed Burliuk to fund his family's eventual relocation to the United States, he never again found the same level of success as he did in Japan.[15] It seems Burliuk's appeal suited Japanese taste at a specific historical moment. His smooth navigation of different art circles demonstrates his exotic appeal to both the avant-garde and the art establishment. The case also reveals Japan's

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[13] Omuka, "David Burliuk," 119.
[14] Ihor Holubizky, "David Burliuk in Japan," in *Futurism and After: David Burlliuk 1882-1967* (Winnipeg: The Winnepeg Art Gallery, 2008), 28.
[15] Myroslav Shkandrij, "Beyond Futurism: David Burliuk 1882-1967," in *Futurism and After: David Burlliuk 1882-1967* (Winnipeg: The Winnepeg Art Gallery, 2008), 13-14.

unified national engagement with the West in order to create a modern identity for the international arena.

Identifying Mavo

The Japanese Futurist movement disbanded around the same time as the emergence of another group, Mavo, which essentially absorbed most of the FAA members but galvanized them toward more provocative methods. Like the FAA, Mavo also sampled from an array of Western idioms, thereby making it difficult for scholars to reach a consensus on the categorical nature of Mavo as a movement. While Japanese scholar Omuka Toshiharu treats the group as the artistic arm of the Japanese Dada movement, American scholar Gennifer Weisenfeld generally avoids the term "Dada" in her 2002 book, the most thorough examination of Mavo to date.[16] Instead, Weisenfeld offers the following description:

> Mavo was a self-proclaimed avant-garde constellation of artists and writers collaborating in a dynamic and rebellious movement that not only shook up the art establishment, but also made an indelible imprint on the art criticism of the period.[17]

Regardless of Mavo's exact classification, Japanese critics' liberal interpretation of Dada reveals to us the limitations of confining a Japanese phenomenon to a Western category. While one Japanese art critic in 1920 compared Dada and Buddhism to suggest that shared an emphasis on nothingness, another critic drew a fresh parallel between Dada and early Christian art for their naïve visual vocabulary.[18] Other voices, however, issued criticism on Dada for being nothing more than a form of Epicureanism—inconsequential and inferior to Expressionism.[19] The

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[16] Omuka Toshiharu. "Tada=Dada (Devotedly Dada) for the Stage: The Japanese Dada Movement 1920-1935," in Foster, *The Eastern Dada Orbit*, 223-310
[17] Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 1.
[18] Ibid., 231.
[19] Omuka, "Tada=Dada," 227-8.

ambiguous nature of Dada as defined by Japanese artists and critics necessitates scholars to recognize local specifications when examining the Japanese adaptation of foreign idioms.

Murayama Tomoyoshi: Keeper of Western Avant-garde

Before establishing Mavo in 1923, Murayama Tomoyoshi completed a brief but formative stint in Germany where he absorbed an impressive array of avant-garde practices in less than a year. Originally intending to study Christianity while abroad, Murayama quickly changed his focus when he found himself immersed in the avant-garde art circles in Berlin. The self-trained Japanese artist frequented Galerie der Sturm, attended avant-garde dances and theatrical performances, and exhibited his found-object assemblages alongside Italian Futurists in the Dusseldorf congress.[20]

Upon his return to Japan, Murayama quickly formed an alliance with the newly disbanded Japanese Futurists. The recent departure of Burliuk cleared room for the charismatic and provocative Murayama, who replaced Burliuk as Japan's new, self-appointed avant-garde spokesperson. Like Burliuk, Murayama matched his intellectual creativity with an eccentric public image. He often wore sheath-like tunics, women's shoes, and a bob hairstyle—all highly unusual for Japanese men at the time.

In his solo exhibition, mounted shortly after his return to Japan, Murayama launched an artistic formulation called "Conscious Constructivism," which can be loosely described as a combination of Dada, Expressionism and Constructivism. Murayama never concretely explained his concept, but the term derived from Wassily Kandinsky's writings. Murayama wrote on Kandinsky more than any other Western artist and he even earned the nickname "the Kandinsky

[20] Ibid., 234.

of Japan." He adopted the Russian painter's ideas on breaking down the boundaries between art and life, but criticized some of Kandinsky's ideas for their ambiguity.[21] Even though no evidence points to an actual dialogue between Murayama and Kandinsky, the former was able to refine his theoretical formulations in writing through an imagined discourse with the Russian artist. Mavo's protean theoretical foundation loosely unified a wide range of experimentation in painting, collages, assemblages, commercial design, dance and theater.

Reaching beyond Kandinsky's formulations, Murayama negotiated the Marinettian interpretation of "tactilism" (*takutora*) for Japanese experimentation. In its strictest definition, tactilism, or the engagement of the physical body, can be achieved through painterly or collage techniques. However, as interpreted by Marinetti in his 1921 manifesto and translated by Murayama, tactilism acquired a sexual dimension through its link to physical touch. Japanese artists such as Shibuya Osama used the Marinetti-Murayama formulation as license for sexual expression. Combined with the Burliukian concept of *faktura* (*fakutora*), a textural essence that evokes primordial civilization, Japanese artists produced collage and assemblage works that referenced primal bodily functions such as sex, vomiting and farting as methods for uncensored, personal expression.[22] Shibuya's integration of real human hair, a light bulb and a magazine clip-out of a nude woman's backside in *Constructivist Stage Design* (1924) illustrates the Japanese adaptation of tactilism and *faktura* (Fig. 6)

Sexual roles, or more specially, the breakdown of gender boundaries constituted a main element of Mavo constructivist formulations. However, unlike Russian efforts that sought to achieve gender equally in the industrialized society, Japanese efforts concentrated on sexual liberation. Although Murayama and his wife Kazuko epitomized the modern Japanese marriage

[21] Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 44-45.
[22] Ibid., 134-35, 140.

in their public persona, characterized by their androgynous clothing and collaborative work relationship, Mavo did not promote women's issues, nor did it encourage female participation in its activities.[23] Instead, Mavo experimentations confronted sexual taboos. As documented by photographs, Murayama danced in the nude and at least one occasion, several cross-dressed male Mavo artists staged an erotic and sinister theatrical performance (Fig. 7, 8).[24]

Even though male cross-dressing can be located in traditional Japanese theater, this tradition ascribed to formula as demarcated by specific characters, costumes and movements. Male nudity and cross-dressing as sexually charged self-expression remained outside of everyday Japanese experience. Mavo's transgressive activities represented the group's defiance against social and political order.

Varvara Bubnova, the Rational Foil

As Burliuk had done through Futurism, Varvara Bubnova engaged the Japanese art world through her authority on Russian Constructivism, which she adjusted for Japanese reception. Bubnova has been discussed, albeit briefly, in the scholarship on Russian Constructivism since the 1970s, but her contribution to Japanese art has only came to the attention of the West since 1995 with Omuka Toshiharu's introductory essay in *A Hidden Fire: Russian and Japanese Cultural Encounters, 1868-1926*.[25]

Best known for her role in the 1920 debates at INKhuK, during which she and fellow constructivists Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova established the

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[23] Ibid., 178.
[24] Ibid., 239.
[25] Omuka Toshiharu, "Varvara Bubnova as Vanguard Artist," in *A Hidden Fire: Russian and Japanese Cultural Encounters, 1868-1926,* ed. J. Thomas Rimer (Stanford, CA: Stanford, 1995), 101-113.

Working Group of Objective Analysis in explicit contestation to Kandinsky's control of INKhuK.[26] The group advocated theoretical departure from the Fauvist artist's emphasis on the psychology of perception. In Bubnova's statements given during these meetings, she argued that "analysis" and "construction" should replace "expression" and "composition" as the foundation of artistic practice.[27]

Shortly after these debates, Bubnova traveled to Japan to visit her sister, who was married to a Japanese scholar. She arrived in June 1922, shortly before Burliuk left in August.[28] Even before Bubnova set foot in Japan, her sister had submitted her work in the 1921 Nika. The entry, an unassuming landscape, failed to attract the attention of the Japanese art world. Upon her arrival in Japan, Bubnova exhibited again in the 1922 Nika. This time, she entered a simple portrait of an old Japanese woman and a modernist woodcut, titled *Grafika*. Like many of Bubnova's work, only written descriptions survive. Supposedly similar to Rodchenko's works created around 1920, *Grafika* was described as "boldly stylized with parallel diagonals."[29] The constructivist work received favorable reception and she was invited to join the Japanese Futurists before they disbanded. For FAA's final exhibition in 1922, Bubnova entered a work titled *Sun-Urb*, which was a near-abstract, dynamic canvas—one of the earliest of the kind that the futurist group had ever seen. According to an art magazine review, when looking at *Sun-Urb,* "We see cobalt blue and sepia rectangles against a vermilion background; the rectangles have simple black lines on them; and the yellow in the upper part is the sun, giving us harmony of light. It is just like the wings of an airplane flying in the sky." Such imaginative praise for

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[26] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2005), 31.
[27] Ibid., 32.
[28] Omuka, "Varvara Bubnova," 102.
[29] Ibid., 103.

Bubnova's work signifies the Russian artist's eventual acceptance by the Japanese public, though only after having exhibited a facet of her oeuvre that matched the public's expectation.

Even though she and Murayama became friends, no evidence points to her direct participation in Mavo activities. Given her situation as a woman in an unfamiliar culture, Bubnova understandably steered clear of provocation. She represented a point of reference for Murayama and Mavo, but never acted as a true agent of change. Like Burliuk, she was a foil to a course of events already set in motion, and even adjusted her public persona to match the expectations of Japanese artists.

Around the same time as the FAA's final exhibition, Bubnova authored two theoretical treatises on Russian Constructivism, which are considered her greatest contributions to Japanese modernism. Both works introduced the latest works of avant-garde artists in Moscow.[30] Bubnova began the longer, first article with an analysis of the fundamental elements of painting that stemmed from debates at INKhUK. She criticized Repin, Shishkin and Levitan for working in academic styles indistinguishable from the West. She then discussed main tendencies of Cubism and Primitivism, and finally, non-objectivity, which she credited as a purely Russian development. Whereas the Cubists reorganized space through objects, the Non-objectivists took space as the new element for the organization of form and material.[31] Construction, a method for structuring non-objective forms, was the ultimate artist language because it corresponded with industry, which enabled the expedient construction of objects that could serve immediate function in society. Bubnova included reproductions of art and architectural works by her fellow Russian artists to illustrate her points.[32] Whereas the first article focused on formal aspects, the

[30] Ibid., 104.
[31] Ibid., 106.
[32] Ibid., 106-7.

second one focused on social environment of contemporary art; the inseparable link between art and society in the aftermath of the Revolution.[33]

Japanese artists had unique access to Bubnova's writings, which were never translated into another language. The degree to which Bubnova's formulations saw fruition in Japan matters less than the dialogue they cultivated with Japanese agents. Bubnova's role as a Russian theoretician provided Murayama with an opportunity for public dialogue and a platform to expound his own formulations. In his 1924 two-part article, "A Critique of Constructivism: an Introduction to and Critique of Plastic Arts that have Emerged in Soviet Russia," he criticized Russian constructivism for its obsession with "aspiration to the purity of form" that was too "decadent" because it created a strained relationship between folk art and avant-garde art. Furthermore, he thought the Russian model concerned itself too much with the relationship between revolutionary and Socialist art."[34] Murayama clearly studied Bubnova's articles and even quoted her at one point.[35] Even though Murayama contended that he was a "Conscious Constructivist" of his own invention, he clearly refined his formulations through a dialogue with Bubnova.

Omuka posits, "In striking contrast to her undeniable theoretical contribution, Bubnova's influence in Japan through actual works of art was not so strong."[36] Even though Bubnova rarely ventured outside of established institutions toward radicalism, she inspired Japanese artists through her advocacy of a rational, scientific approach to avant-gardism that counter-balanced more provocative, visceral approaches favored by Murayama and to a certain extent, Burliuk.

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[33] Ibid., 107.
[34] Ibid., 112.
[35] Ibid., 109.
[36] Ibid., 112.

Earthquake—Reconstruction—Construction

Bubnova's constructivist theories could not have reached Japanese artists at a more opportune time. On September 1, 1923, Japanese society experienced a violent rupture from its past through the Great Kanto Earthquake, which killed 100,000 people and destroyed Tokyo, Yokohama and surrounding areas. The aftermath presented artists with a unique opportunity to superimpose a new vocabulary on the obliterated landscape. Many responded through painting memorial images and some even created visual renderings of the earthquake's powerful tremors using Futurist styles (Fig. 9).[37]

This natural disaster further activated a new Japanese avant-garde consciousness. Mavo members, true to their anarchist spirit, responded euphorically because the earthquake presented a tremendous opportunity for the reinvention of a new landscape. The mass destruction necessitated the need for temporary shelters called *barakku* (barrack) to house displaced residents from all levels of society. Artists joined the reconstruction effort by forming teams to decorate these *barakku*. For the first time, Mavo artists found a commercial outlet by taking on commissions for the design of businesses that operated out of *barakku*, such as Morie Bookstore and Hayashiya Restaurant (Fig. 10).[38]

In addition to architectural and signage design, artists also ventured into other sectors of commercial arts, such as textile and clothing design. Although never as revolutionary in form as the fashions conceived by Russian constructivists Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova, kimonos printed with bold geometric patterns emerged in this period. Miki Hisao's creations were appropriately dubbed "constructivist kimonos" for their integration of words and geometric

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[37] Nihon Mangakai, *Daishinsai Gashū* (Tokyo: Kanao Bun'endō, 1923).
[38] For a detailed discussion of *barakku* decoration, see Gennifer Weisenfeld, "Designing After Disaster: Barrack Decoration and the Great Kanto Earthquake," *Japanese Studies* 18, no, 3 (1998): 229-246.

forms (Fig. 11).[39]

The Great Kanto Earthquake inducted Mavo artists into industrial production and the commercial arts. Exhibited less than one year after the earthquake, Murayama's architectural model for a Mavo headquarters was less of a tectonic integration of form and function than an imaginative but unbuildable expression of urban chaos (Fig. 12). By the mid-1920s, however, as key Mavo members shifted away from self-expression toward proletarian art movements, Murayama created an assemblage titled *Construction* that articulated his artistic evolution toward rational composition (Fig. 13)

Mavo Magazine Engages Life

Mavo's most active stage, characterized by its constructivist activities, and its decline shortly thereafter are documented in its self-published magazine, which ran seven issues from 1924-1925. By the third issue, the magazine was thick with advertisements and the usage of actual newspaper as its pages (Fig. 14). In discussing Liubov Popova's constructivist paintings on wood, Christine Lodder notes how the visible wood ground activated negative space as positive space, thereby engaging wood as a constructive element.[40] Similarly, the different physical elements of the Mavo magazine simultaneously engaged one another. The inclusion of actual newspaper opened a dialogue between unintentional and featured content; newspaper advertisements and magazine advertisements, and of course, with Mavo artworks featured in the plates. The pages of the magazine became a microcosm of the real world where Mavo artworks activated the realm of daily life and the emerging commercial world.

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[39] Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 206-207.
[40] Christine Lodder, "Liubov Popova: From Painting to Textile Design," paper presented at the conference "Constructivism and the Art of Everyday Life," Tate Modern, March 28, 2009.

The third issue also included the attachment of real firecrackers on its cover (Fig. 15). Designers probably intended for readers to light the firecrackers after reading to literally blast a hole in the magazine. This provocative attempt to activate real life through art created problems with government censors, who prohibited the issue's distribution.[41] The subsequent issues of the Mavo magazine were noticeably thinner until the magazine ceased in publication, thereby signaled the demise of Mavo and an important avant-garde period in Japanese art history.

Conclusion

Despite an uneasy political relationship in the early twentieth century, Japan and Russia developed and sustained a meaningful intellectual exchange that extended deeply into the artistic realm. Although the avant-garde movements of the two countries reveal clear points of intersection, Japan's avant-garde identity should not be viewed as the accidental mistranslation of passé forms, but instead, as a parallel course to Western movements with intersecting transversals. The Japanese avant-garde deployed Western-originated idioms to construct an identity that was at once global in employing an international modernist vocabulary and local in accommodating the need for individual expression. As this examination attempts to illuminate, the West can be a construct in the imagination of the non-West, created by the latter in order to locate itself through juxtaposition. Again evoking the term "Occidentalism," this paper posits that Japanese artists, through various points of engagement with Russian art, constructed Russia as a flawed cultural authority with whom to consult, challenge, and ultimately outgrow.

As Japan's militaristic state exerted more control over its citizens, the nationalist mission enlisted the avant-garde for propaganda as the Soviet state had similarly done. Although short-

[41] Omuka, "Tada=Dada," 268.

lived, Japan's Taisho-era avant-garde movements laid the foundation for post-war avant-garde groups such as Gutai, which confidently embraced Japanese tradition and catalyzed developments in Western modernism in the 1950s-60s.

Images

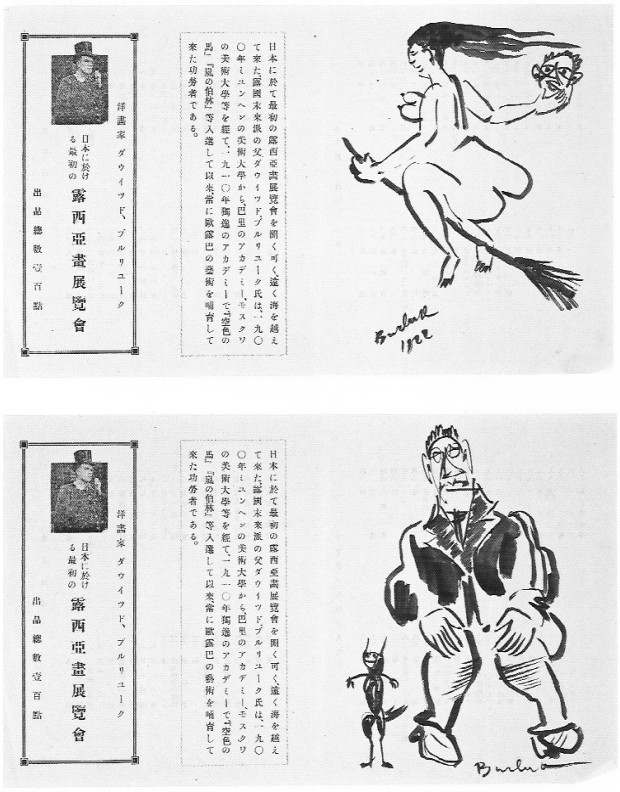

Fig. 1. Japanese leaflets advertising a Russian art exhibition featuring David Burliuk. c. 1921-1922. Ink on paper. 19.5 x 32.8. Source: *Futurism and After: David Burliuk 1882-1967*, 43.

Fig. 2. Yanase Masamu. *Moji*. 1920. Oil on canvas. 45.5 x 60.8 cm. Musashino Art University Museum and Library. Source: Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, pl. 2.

Fig. 3. David Burliuk. *The Art of Dostoevskii*. 1921. Source: Omuka, "David Burliuk and the Japanese Avant-garde."

Fig. 4. David Burliuk. *Portrait of a Family (Morimoto Family)*. 1921. Oil on canvas. Source: Omuka, "David Burliuk and the Japanese Avant-garde."

Fig. 5. Oura Shuzo. *Cup with Foam and the Smell of Meat*. 1922. Source: Omuka, Toshiharu. "David Burliuk and the Japanese Avant-garde."

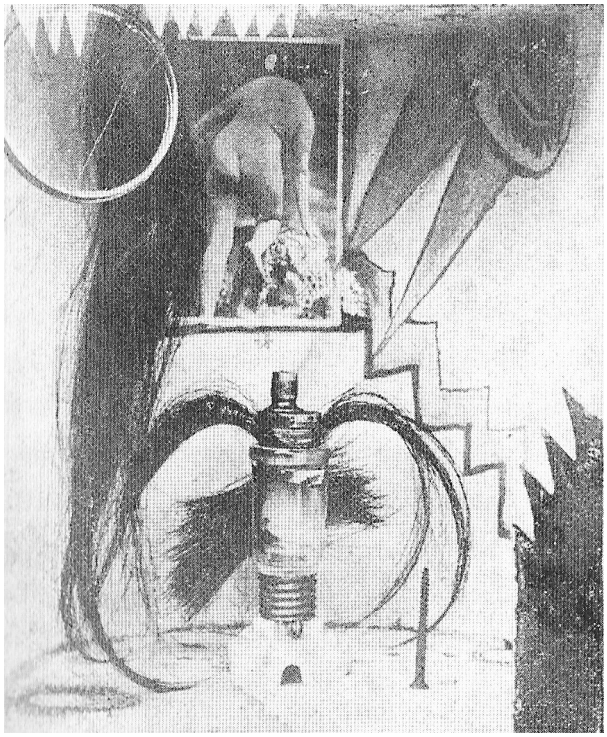

Fig. 6. Shibuya Osamu. *Constructivist Stage Design*. 1924. Mixed media, presumed lost. Photograph in Mavo magazine, Issue 3. National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. Source:

Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 137.

Fig. 7. Murayama Tomoyoshi dancing in the nude in his atelier. 1923-1924. Photographs courtesy of Omuka Toshiharu. Source: Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 237.

Fig. 8. Mavo members performing “Dance of Death” from the third act of Frank Wedekind’s 1905 play *Death and the Devil*. Photograph in *Mavo*, no. 3 (September 1924). National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. Source: Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 240.

Fig. 9. Futurist-style painting by a member of a *manga* group. Source: Nihon Mangakai, *Daishinsai Gashū* (Tokyo: Kanao Bun'endō, 1923).

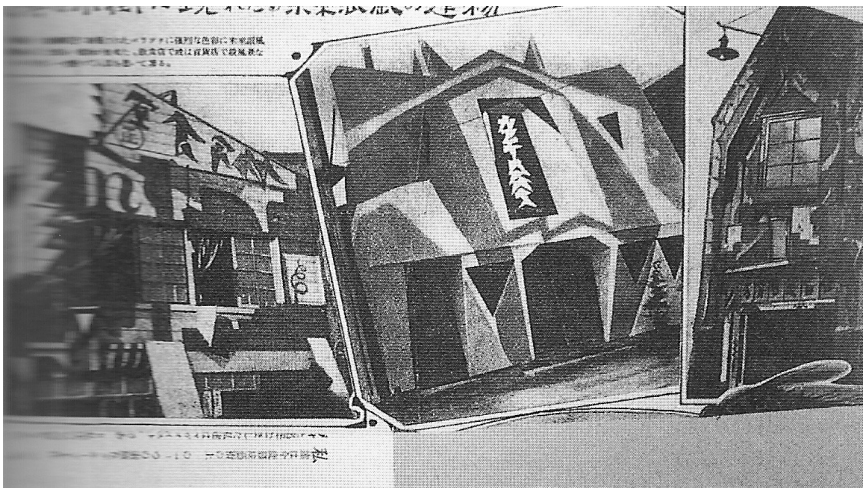

Fig. 10. Mavo. Hayashi restaurant, barrack decoration project, early 1924. In “Shinsaigo no shinshokugyo: Ude o furu zekko no kikai” (New occupations after the earthquake: They skillfully display their abilities, the best machine). Chuo shinbun, March 6, 1924 (am. ed.), 3. Source: Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 82-83.

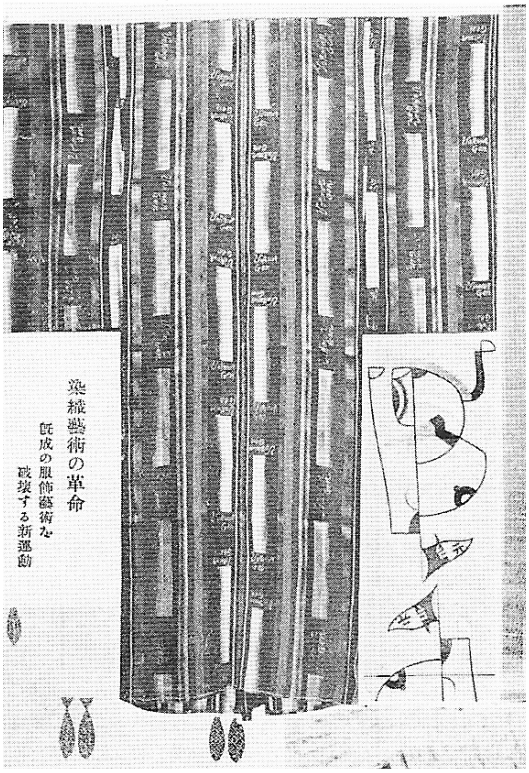

Fig. 11. Miki Hisao. “Constructivist kimono.” Design for Shokusen Geijutsu Renmei (Union of Woven and Dyed Arts), 1926. Source: Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 206.

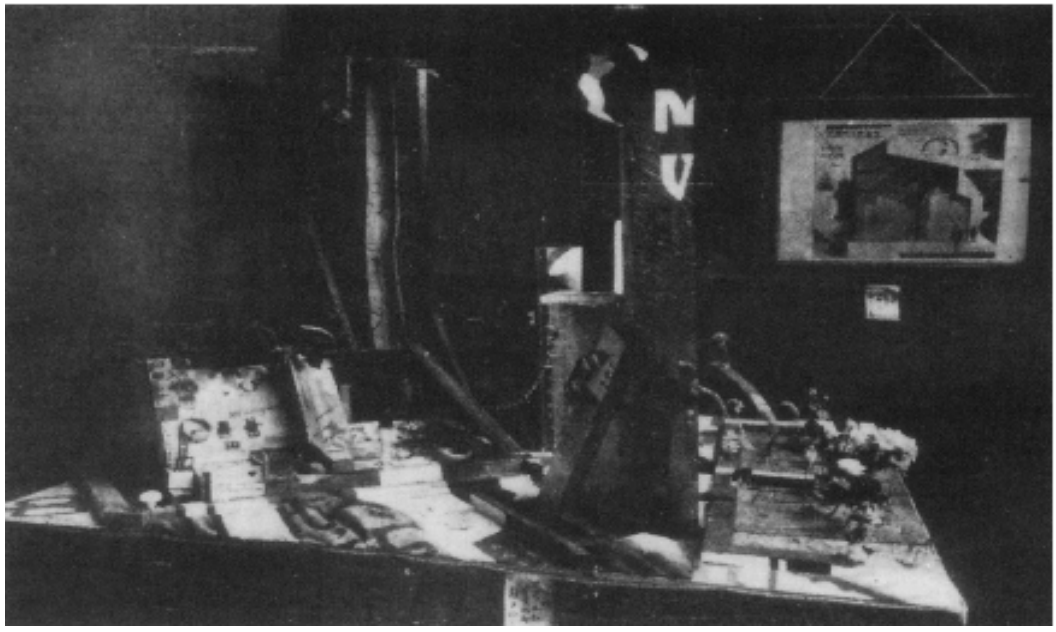

Fig. 12. View of Murayama Tomoyoshi's *Architectural Idea for Mavo Headquarters*. Mixed media. Dimensions unknown. Displayed at the Exhibition of Plans for the Reconstruction of the Imperial Clity, Tokyo, April 1924. From *Kenchiku Shinchi* 65, no. 6 (June1924): unpaginated. Source: Weisenfeld, *Mavo*, 88.

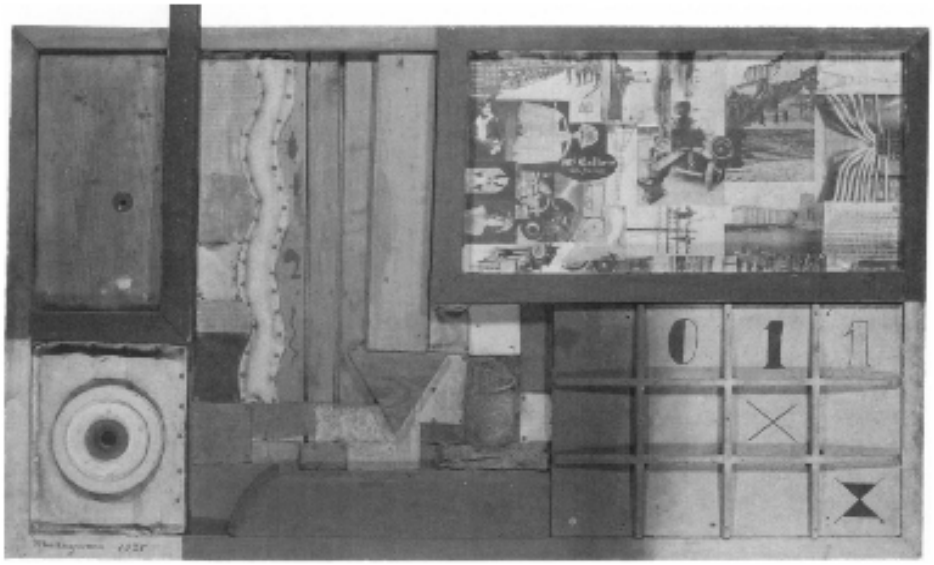

Fig. 13. Murayama Tomoyoshi. *Construction*. 1925. Oil and assemblage on board. 84.5 x 120.5 cm. Repository Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan (Collection National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo). Source: ARTstor.

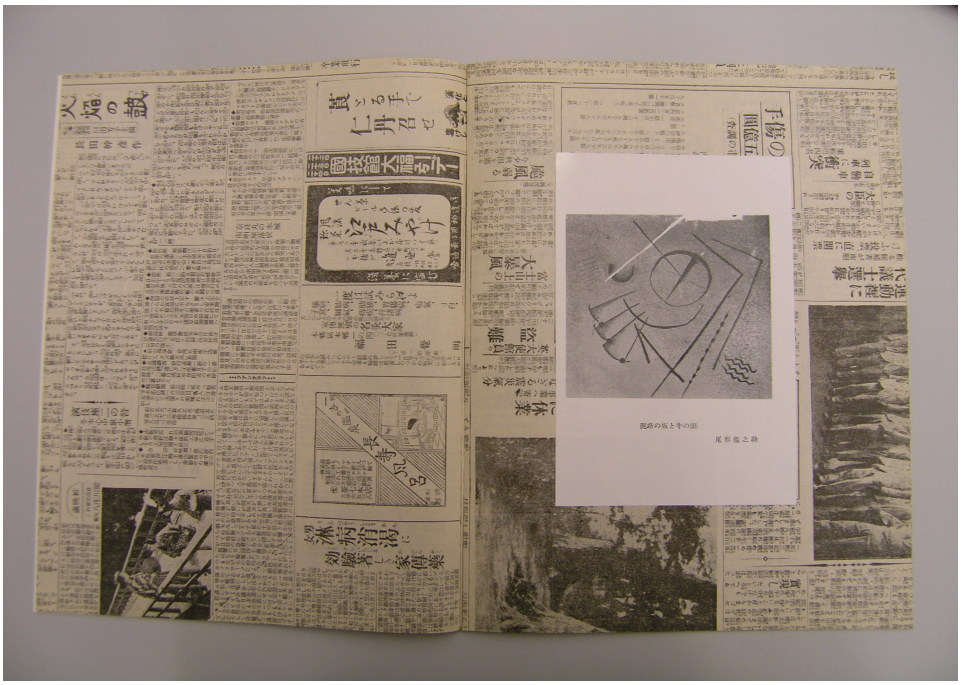

Fig. 14. *Mavo* magazine, no. 3 (September 1924). Source: personal photograph taken at the Cartoon Research Library, The Ohio State University.

Fig. 15. Cover, *Mavo* magazine, no. 3 (September 1924). Source: Personal photograph taken at the Cartoon Research Library, The Ohio State University.

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